

APPENDICES

The “Secret Gospel” of Mark

In 1973, Morton Smith, a professor of ancient history at Columbia University, published two books about what he called the “Secret Gospel” of Mark.¹ The gospel that he had (by his own report) discovered in the library of a Greek Orthodox monastery in the Judean desert comprised fragmentary passages that were stated to be drawn from a longer (or “mystical”) version of the Gospel of Mark. The gospel passages appeared as quotations in a letter purportedly written by Clement of Alexandria in the second century—a letter (written in Greek) that Smith found in the monastery library in a hand-written copy dating (based on paleographic evidence) from the eighteenth century. Ever since the publication of Smith’s two books on “Secret Mark”, there has been much scholarly controversy over the authenticity of—and the motives behind—Smith’s research.

As of the publication date of this book (early 2011), certain fundamental questions have been answered with a great (or even an absolute) degree of definitiveness—as a result of which there is a strong case for accepting Smith’s original evaluation of the second-century letter as an authentic Clementine document and his evaluation of the quotations contained therein as authentic remnants of a longer version of Mark that is otherwise lost.²

Many years ago, Avatar Adi Da identified “Secret Mark” as a document of particular importance. Its importance lies in its clear suggestion that there was an esoteric (and, literally, secret) form of Spiritual initiation given by Jesus of Galilee to his qualified disciples. Thus, in writing His Rendering of the New Testament gospel story (in Part Six of *The Pneumaton*, pp. 299–331), Avatar Adi Da chose to include “Secret Mark” among the texts that He drew on. Clement’s letter was the starting point for section 1, and the quotations from “Secret Mark” were the starting point for section 18, in Adi Da’s writing of Part Six.

The questions that have now been answered with some definitiveness relate to (1) the actual physical existence of the Clement letter, (2) Smith's capabilities as a potential forger of eighteenth-century Greek handwriting, and (3) Smith's fluency in reading eighteenth-century Greek handwriting.

1. Was the Clement letter ever seen by anyone other than Morton Smith?

Yes.

For many years, perhaps the single most grievous point of contention relative to "Secret Mark" was that no one other than Morton Smith (so it was believed) had ever seen Clement's letter. Questions were raised as to why no scientific tests had been done to confirm whether the ink actually dated from the eighteenth century—and the fact that no one seemed able to locate the letter raised questions as to whether the document could be a twentieth-century forgery. It was only three decades after Smith's two books were published that the truth finally came to light: A group of reputable scholars had seen the letter in the mid-1970s, and the document had been transferred (at that time) to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate library in Jerusalem.

The group of scholars saw the letter in 1976—eighteen years after Smith had originally discovered it. But it was not until 2003—another twenty-seven years later—that Guy G. Stroumsa, one of the group, finally published the story:

In the spring of 1976, a party of four, including the late David Flusser, Professor of New Testament, the late Shlomo Pines, Professor of Medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophy, both at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Archimandrite Meliton, from the Greek Patriarchate in Jerusalem (at the time a research student at the Hebrew University) and myself (then a graduate student at Harvard University) drove (in my car) from Jerusalem to Mar Saba monastery, in the Judean wilderness, in the quest for Clement's letter. Together with Flusser and Pines, I had been intrigued by Morton Smith's sensational description of his find, and we wanted to see the

text with our own eyes. Archimandrite Meliton had agreed to accompany us. When we reached the monastery, with the help of one of the monks, we began searching for Isaac Vossius’ edition of the Letters of Ignatius on the very dusty shelves of the library in the monastery’s tower. . . . We did not put our expectations too high, but at some point, the monk did find the book, with “Smith 65” inscribed on its front page, and the three manuscript pages of Clement’s letter written on the blank pages at the end of the book, exactly as described by Smith. The book had obviously remained where Smith had found it and had replaced it, after having photographed the manuscript letter.³

Why had Stroumsa waited twenty-seven years to make this crucial fact public? Stroumsa says it was only then that he realized he was the “last living Western scholar” to have seen the Clement manuscript, and that he therefore had “a duty to testify in front of a skeptical scholarly world”.⁴

The story did not end there, however. Having found the letter, Stroumsa and the others in his party were keen to have it scientifically dated, so they secured permission from the monks at Mar Saba to take the book to the Patriarchate library in Jerusalem. Their hope was to have the ink tested, in order to determine whether the copy of the letter actually dated to the eighteenth century (as had been concluded by the expert paleographers Smith consulted). However, when it turned out that only the police department had the ability to perform such a test, the Patriarchate librarians chose not to allow the manuscript to leave their hands.⁵

Although there was no testing of the ink, one of the librarians did make color photographs of Clement’s letter—a fact that (once again) was not discovered until many years later. At a time previous to Stroumsa’s disclosure of the successful 1976 visit to Mar Saba, Charles W. Hedrick (professor of religious studies at Southwest Missouri University) and Nikolaos Olympiou (professor of Old Testament at the University of Athens) were attempting to solve the mystery of why no one seemed to know where Clement’s letter was. In the process, they contacted Father Kallistos Dourvas, who had been one of the Patriarchate librarians at the time that the

document was transferred from Mar Saba to Jerusalem. Father Kallistos not only told them about the color photographs he had taken (in 1976 or 1977) but allowed them to publish the photographs (in 2000).⁶

In the course of his conversations with Hedrick and Olympiou, Father Kallistos told the story of what had happened to Clement's letter, giving a possible reason why its current whereabouts are still a mystery. Together with the color photographs of Clement's letter, Hedrick and Olympiou published a summary of Father Kallistos' account:

Although [Archimandrite] Melito [sic] acted on his own initiative in bringing the single volume to the [Patriarchate] library [in Jerusalem], the transfer was described by Kallistos as part of a general transfer of manuscripts from Hagios Sabbas [Mar Saba] to the Patriarchate library in order to better provide for their care. Kallistos planned on shelving printed books in one location and manuscripts in another location, but that distribution of library holdings never occurred.

. . . Kallistos removed the Clement manuscript from the printed Voss edition of Ignatius for the purpose of photographing it, and then for shelving along with other manuscripts in the Patriarchate library, in keeping with his original plan for distributing the library holdings.

For as long as he was librarian (until 1990), the Clement letter was kept with the Voss edition, but as separate items. Kallistos does not know what has happened to the manuscript since he ceased being librarian. He does not recall whether or not he catalogued the Voss book and the letter of Clement into the library. He thinks the reason the present staff cannot find the letter is that the Clement letter has nothing distinctive about it, and for that reason is difficult to locate. He says they frequently ask him where to find things.⁷

Thus, the real existence (at least until 1990) of the Clement letter is no longer in question. However, its current whereabouts remain unknown. The letter may be altogether lost—or it may resurface at any time, raising the possibility of a definitive scientific dating.

2. Did Morton Smith possess the skill to forge eighteenth-century Greek handwriting?

No.

Morton Smith consulted with a number of paleographers relative to the date of the handwriting in the letter. The clear consensus was that the letter was written in the eighteenth century. However, after the publication of Smith’s books, some scholars began to raise the suspicion that Smith himself had forged the letter, imitating eighteenth-century Greek handwriting.

The hypothesis of Morton Smith as forger of the letter was finally put to the test in 2010, when the Biblical Archaeology Society asked an expert in Greek handwriting, Venetia Anastasopoulou,⁸ to compare photographs of the handwritten Clement letter with samples of Greek handwriting known to be Smith’s.

According to Anastasopoulou, the Greek writing of the Clement letter contains “several paleographic peculiarities (abbreviations and ligatures) which were used in the 18th century. . . . This kind of writing was learned and used by few people because of its difficulties in writing or rather in drawing them.” Anastasopoulou compared this handwriting to numerous samples of Smith’s Greek handwriting, including a transcription of the entire Clement letter. In this, she found differences “in notes and scripts.”

“Although [the Clement letter] is a difficult style,” she says, “and needs a lot of practice in order to be able to write in this way, the text is written spontaneously with an excellent rhythm. . . . It also shows a skillful penmanship of a well-educated and trained writer. . . .

“[Smith’s Greek penmanship] is like that of a school student. It is obvious that his hand is not familiarized in Greek writing so as to be able to use it freely and with ease.”

Anastasopoulou’s examination found “substantial non-agreement” between the handwriting of the Clement letter and Smith’s Greek handwriting in numerous categories, including spontaneity, writing rhythm, size, slant, writing movement, speed, depth, format and shape, connections and conjunctions, letter endings and unconscious individual habits. . . .

Anastasopoulou concludes, “The level of [Morton Smith’s] ability concerning his Greek-language handwriting characteristics is like that of young school children. . . . It is highly probable that Morton Smith could not have simulated the document of ‘Secret Mark.’”⁹

Thus, in the view of this professional handwriting analyst, the “Smith as forger” hypothesis does not stand up to scrutiny of the evidence.

3. Did Morton Smith possess the skill to read eighteenth-century Greek handwriting with fluency?

No.

In 2009, *Biblical Archaeology Review* published a four-part article, “‘Secret Mark’: A Modern Forgery?”¹⁰ The overall communication of the article is that the three authors regard Smith’s discovery as genuine. In other words, on the basis of the available evidence, they agree that the document Smith studied is a copy of a letter originally written by Clement of Alexandria and that the quotations in the letter came from a longer (variant) form of the Gospel of Mark which still existed in the second century.

One of the authors, the renowned scholar of early Christianity Helmut Koester, recounted his experience of consulting with Smith about the Clement letter, ten years before its publication:

In 1963, when I was a visiting professor at the University of Heidelberg, Morton had a sabbatical, which he spent searching for magical texts in European museums. He then asked me if he could bring me his manuscript, the first draft of what a decade later was to be published by Harvard University Press under the title Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark. We met several hours a day for a whole week, discussing details of the interpretation of Secret Mark. During those days, I learned that Morton seriously struggled to understand and interpret this document; he also had difficulty deciphering the 18th-century handwriting in which the letter had been copied on the blank pages at the end of the 17th-century book. Obviously, a forger would not have had the problems that Morton was struggling with.¹¹

Thus, Koester’s testimony further confirms that it is highly implausible that Smith forged the Clement letter (including the “Secret Mark” quotations).

A Note on the Sex Question

Controversy over Smith’s speculation that the event of esoteric initiation might have involved “physical union” has tended to overshadow the truly significant reality—the evidence that Jesus may have reserved certain teachings about “the mystery of the kingdom of God” for those few disciples who were spiritually prepared to receive them. (Another instance of such esoteric instruction—given at night in order to ensure secrecy—is the canonical account of Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus, when Jesus declared that, in order to “enter the kingdom of God”, a person must be “born again”, “of the Spirit”.) On the issue of whether or not “Secret Mark” suggests a sexual aspect to such initiation, the weight of scholarly opinion is in clear disagreement with Smith. Regardless of their conclusions regarding the authenticity or inauthenticity of “Secret Mark”, virtually all writers on the subject agree that there are no grounds for interpreting anything in “Secret Mark” to imply that there was a sexual aspect to Jesus’ secret initiations. ■

Form Critical Considerations

A great deal has been written about the literary qualities of “Secret Mark”, and whether they support a second-century dating or not. Two recent publications are important in pointing out that “Secret Mark” exemplifies certain literary characteristics relating to (1) the textual history of the gospels (as determined through form criticism¹²) and to (2) the letter-writing style of the second century. These literary characteristics have been defined by scholarship only in the years

after Morton Smith published his two books. Thus, this is another form of evidence in favor of the authenticity of “Secret Mark”.

Helmut Koester points out that the story of the “raising of the young man from the dead” in “Secret Mark” is a “perfect older form” of the story of the raising of Lazarus in the Gospel of John. This kind of parallel could only be recognized by applying the form critical approach. Koester remarks that Smith was neither trained in nor sympathetic with the form critical approach, but was rather a proponent of source criticism, an older scholarly approach that did not have a means of explaining the forms of narrative resemblance in the two “resurrection” stories:

The resurrection story in Secret Mark also has a close parallel in the story of the raising of Lazarus told in the Gospel of John (John 11). Both stories occur in Bethany. Lazarus is in Bethany by Jerusalem, and the boy in Secret Mark is in another Bethany, beyond the Jordan. In the Secret Gospel, a sister comes to Jesus telling him of her brother who died. In John, the two sisters who come to Jesus are named—Martha and Mary. In both stories, there is a loving relationship between Jesus and the person who is resuscitated. In Secret Mark the young man looks at Jesus and loves him. In John it is reported “how he [Jesus] loved him [Lazarus]” (John 11:36). In Secret Mark a loud voice is heard from the tomb; in John, Jesus cries with a loud voice (John 11:43). Secret Mark’s story is certainly much older in its form than John’s account of the raising of Lazarus. In John the author of the Gospel of John has expanded this story.

Morton Smith was knowledgeable in none of this. It would have been completely beyond his ability to forge a text that, in terms of form criticism, is a perfect older form of the same story as appears in John 11 as the raising of Lazarus.¹³

Koester also draws attention to the research of Jeff Jay, who has investigated the letter-writing conventions of the second century in relation to the epistolary qualities of “Secret Mark”:

Whoever wants to make the case that Morton Smith forged Clement’s letter has to . . . demonstrate how a forger of the mid-20th century

could have known so well the conventions of letter-writing in antiquity that only scholarship at the end of the 20th century has clarified—indeed a “superhuman accomplishment,” as Jeff Jay has stated in his recent publication. He demonstrates that particular characteristics of letter writing in Clement’s time found in the letter containing the quotes from the Secret Gospel had not yet been recognized as typical at the time Morton Smith published the Secret Gospel.¹⁴

In the abstract of his article, Jay states:

This article offers the first epistolary analysis of Clement’s letter to Theodore and demonstrates that it comports in form, content, and function with other ancient letters that addressed similar circumstances. In these letters authors issue accounts of the composition and transmission of their works in order to diminish confusions that arose when premature, stolen, and conflicting copies reached the public. The analogy provided by these letters helps establish the remarkable generic coherence of the letter to Theodore, which is difficult to explain by the supposition that the letter is a modern forgery.¹⁵

Jay concludes his article with the following summary:

The letter to Theodore is plausible in light of letter writing in the late second or early third century and has tight generic coherence in form, content, and function. The account offered here can thereby become one part of a cumulative argument for authenticity. Of course, as many on both sides agree, only the rediscovery of the manuscript will determine this question once and for all. But those who argue the letter is a twentieth century forgery must now allow that the forger had a solid knowledge of epistolography, ancient practices of composition and transmission, and the ability to weave a letter with fine generic texture, in addition to previously recognized competency in patristics, eighteenth-century Greek paleography, Markan literary techniques, and tremendous insight into the psychology and art of deception. Those developing theories of forgery must thus posit a forger whose breadth of knowledge is becoming, we may say, superhuman.¹⁶

Thus, these examples of ongoing research into the literary content and form of “Secret Mark” support Morton Smith’s original evaluation of the document as authentic.



For a representative bibliography of sources on “Secret Mark” (including proponents of its authenticity and proponents of its inauthenticity), see the footnoted references in the *Biblical Archaeology Review* article, “‘Secret Mark’: A Modern Forgery?” (November/December 2009).